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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study explored the critical evaluations of audience members who viewed an ethnographic performance adapted, directed, and performed by a doctoral student in the Speech Communication Department on the campus of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. The performance was a one-person show consisting of a series of personal narratives by female exotic dancers which were juxtaposed with excerpts from feminist theoretical discourse. By virtue of this juxtaposition, the narratives argued with and against those feminist perspectives. Evaluative responses were received from 17 undergraduate students who were required to attend the performance and write a critique as a class assignment. Responses were also received from graduate students in the performance studies concentration and three performance studies faculty members, all of whom attended a 1-hour oral critique/discussion following the performance. The majority of the evaluative comments made by the faculty and graduate students during the oral critique focused on the performance as a critical act, while informal comments before the performance raised issues about the performance's academic suitability. More than with any other critical context, the undergraduates' evaluations principally focused on the performance as an aesthetic event. The absence of aesthetic considerations from the faculty and graduate student critiques raises concerns about how the speech communication discipline values aesthetics. (Contains 27 references and 7 notes.) (RS)

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What's a Nice Scholar Like You Doing with a Topic Like This?
Or
Interpretive Communities Make Sense

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> Ethnographers do more than just observe the lives of Others. They participate in a series of multivocal reflexive interactions that are saturated with power relations and struggles over the meaning of cultural identity. (West 209)

> When ethnographers of performance complement their participant observation fieldwork by actually performing for different audiences the verbal art they have studied in situ, they expose themselves to double jeopardy. They become keenly aware that performance does not proceed in ideological innocence and axiological purity. (Conquergood "Performing as a Moral Act..." 2)

As West and Conquergood both suggest, ethnographic performers and/or researchers should account for the dynamic and tensive social processes which impact upon the production of meaning in their work. In this essay I shall explore the critical evaluations I received from audience members who viewed an ethnographic performance I adapted, directed, and performed on the campus of Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. Moreover, I shall examine what I am calling the critical/social contexts generated by the production. "Critical contexts" here denotes the ways that the performance was theoretically positioned and made available for critical assessment. The term "social contexts" refers to the shared interests and agendas that members of the audience held and which bond them to and within an interpretive community. While I note that one might claim membership with several, possibly contradictory contexts or communities, the notion of the combined critical/social contexts is a heuristic device used to assess the criticism produced by the performance and to assess how communities make their evaluations.

As performance studies scholarship has shifted from text-centered research towards an examination of performance itself, performance as a social phenomenon has assumed disciplinary emphasis. It is, as Langellier notes, in this "conjunction of performance and society" that the expanded notion of a "social context" enables this broadened disciplinary emphasis ("From Text..." 60). Performance as a social and cultural event may resist, rupture, and/or reproduce societal or individual expectations

and values. As our discipline examines the social implications of performance, the once implicit political and ideological relationship between art and the social world becomes increasingly explicit (Strine 391). Performance of ethnography brings the political and ideological in performance to the foreground; it values, indeed "celebrate[s] the necessary and indissoluble link between art and life" (Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act..." 1).

I suggest that there were three non-discrete critical contexts that enabled critical access and assessment generated by my production, "What's a Nice Commodity Like You Doing in a Spectacle Like This?." This performance was a one-person show consisting of a series of personal narratives by female exotic dancers which were juxtaposed with excerpts from feminist theoretical discourse. By virtue of this juxtaposition, the narratives argued with and against those feminist perspectives. First, the production itself, then, was an act of critique. Second, this production was part of my ongoing doctoral studies and was, thus, a scholarly activity. Finally, the production formed part of the Speech Communication department's season and was, therefore, an institutionally sanctioned aesthetic event.

Audiences were prompted to attend this production by and for a variety of agendas. Loosely configured, these agendas created three noteworthy interpretive social communities. Members of these communities situated their evaluations of the performance in relation to the three critical contexts I have noted above. After a brief description of the performance, I shall examine each of these critical contexts, the agendas that commonly create an interpretive community, and the criticism the show received. Finally, I shall offer my perspective on how this combination of critical context and interpretive community both constrains and constitutes these 'communities' sense-making and evaluation.

Description of the Performance

The set for this performance consisted of five mannequins arranged around the stage dressed in minimal clothing indicative of what a stripper might dance in. Draped on the mannequins were various articles of everyday clothing. Upstage center there was a table with make up, hairbrushes, and a mirror; a stool was set downstage in front of the table. Behind the table was a large screen upon which photos of strippers, pin-ups, and strip clubs were projected, as were the printed textual excerpts from feminist theory.

There were six sections to the show. Each section was given a title reflective of issues from feminist theory. The titles were "Victimization," "Objectification," "Commodification," "Visible Difference," "Lesbian Desire," and "The Gaze." These titles were projected on a slide prior to each section and were intended to be used as a kind of lens through which to view that section. Although I use the metaphor of a lens, the view produced was never intended to be clear or accurate. To clarify the tensive relationship between the theory and the narratives, the slide for each title consisted of the title word placed upon a field of exclamation points and question marks. In the process of the show, I hoped that the theory would be both deconstructed and constructed. After the title, the section continued with alternating slides of strippers and text. In the five sections where I performed a narrative, the "character's" name was the last slide before the narrative began and it remained up during her narrative. Between the sections, while music played and the slides of the texts and the images were projected, I would change on stage into the everyday clothes from one of the mannequins and alter my hairstyle at the make up table in order to "become" the next character and to prepare for the next section.

The five narratives I performed came from interviews I had with women who work or have worked as exotic dancers (also known as strippers). Although all the

narratives were edited, all but one were generally the words that the named individual woman spoke. In creating the performances of those four narratives I endeavored to find in my body the bodily deportment, pacing, rhythm, and intonation evocative of what I observed the original women had used. I did so by reflecting on the time we shared in the interviews as well as through close listening to the audio recordings of these interviews. The one remaining narrative was a composite fictional persona created from my field notes as well as experiences told to me by a few of women whom I interviewed. One section, entitled "Visible Difference" did not contain a narrative but was rather a choreographed depiction of my ethnographic search for women of color. This section was intended to indicate that the show fails to represent women of color who strip and to suggest reasons for that failure.

In short, the overall construction of the performance may be said to create what Catherine Belsey calls an "interrogative text":

> The interrogative text...disrupts the unity of the reader by discouraging identification with a unified subject of the enunciation. The position of the 'author' [sic] inscribed in the text, if it can be located at all, is seen as questioning or as literally contradictory....the reader [is invited] to produce answers to the questions it implicitly or explicitly raises. (91)

The Performance as Critique

The Critical Context:

The performance of "What's a Nice Commodity..." constituted an act of critique on at least three planes. First, given that the performance consisted of personal narratives collected as part of an ethnographic study, audiences were invited to listen to the life experiences of a muted group in our society. This articulation of experiences which were, presumably, not generally shared by those in the audience, may have

constituted, as Langellier asserts, a "social process" which "present[ed] some opportunity for cultural challenge and innovation" ("Personal Narratives..." 264). As a social process, these narratives constructed the realities of a "particular speech community" (265) and as such they articulated perspectives which may have challenged prevailing conceptions of that group.

Moreover, a second plane on which the performance worked as critique concerns the manner in which I employed these narratives. Given that I selected and edited these narratives and governed where and how these narratives would fit into my production concept, I employed these narratives for performative and rhetorical means. While I believe that I endeavored to respect the integrity of the women in my study and the narratives we jointly created, the act of re-contextualizing the narratives into a performance event nevertheless puts their voices and experiences into the rhetorical service of the performance. The political implications inherent in personal narratives are further elaborated by Langellier when she states that "all personal narratives are ideological because they evolve from a structure of power relations and simultaneously produce, maintain, and reproduce that power structure" (267). I, as the performer/ethnographer, in my privileged status as performance studies artist/scholar, was empowered to voice these narratives to audiences that these women are not empowered to reach.

Additionally, through juxtaposing their narratives with and against feminist theory, I performed their narratives within a production framework that the women in my study did not help to construct and within a production framework that constituted a critical act that they did not necessarily expect or intend. Yet, however they are employed, personal narratives are ideologically imbued political tools which can function to "legitimate the meaning systems of dominant groups and the status quo...[and which] may also delegitimate or contest dominant meaning systems" (268

emphasis in original). In constructing this performance I deliberately deployed these narratives as an "ideological device" (268) intended to problematize mainstream and feminist conceptions of the lives of exotic dancers. Yet, while the manner in which the women's narratives were ultimately contextualized within the performance was not made altogether clear to the women during the interviews (since it was formulated after these meetings), it was through my encounter with these women that I arrived at the concept for the show. Wood and Cox remind ethnographers to maintain a respectful attitude towards those we study and that "we have an obligation to listen receptively and to let their views affect our own" (283). It was through listening receptively and allowing the women's views to affect my own that the production concept was ultimately conceived. The feminist conceptual understandings I held at the beginning of my research were continually problematized by my encounters with the women during the course of my study. In order to respect the people I interviewed I found that I needed, as Wood and Cox suggest, to "subordinate [my] theories, concepts, and ideological penchants to the primacy of [their] embodied experience" (284). In my view of the performance, the production concept permitted the narratives to resist or reaffirm the feminist theory and thereby destabilized the feminist theory. In the process, the narratives too were destabilized, although to a lesser extent.

I believe that as I was the director/adapter/performer and that I implemented the overtly strategic structure for the show, I was plainly implicated as the one who was and is accountable for the rhetorical and political message that the production concept attempted to convey. Yet, as I believe that the strength of the show resided on the level of character and not solely on my orchestration of the piece, the women were not overshadowed by the feminist critique. Rather, my hope is, as Wood and Cox would have it, the embodied experience of my subjects was what was foregrounded.

Beyond the use of personal narratives as "social process" and as "political

praxis" and their juxtapositioning with feminist theory, the performance constituted an act of critique by virtue of being produced on a university campus. As feminists have begun to find positions of power within the academy, feminism in its various forms is increasingly a discourse of power.[1] Moreover, with the rise of multiple feminisms, these various feminist perspectives jockey for position with and among other feminist perspectives.[2] Producing the performance within an academic setting constitutes a critical act with/against feminist academic discourse, a discourse which generally silences the voices of sex trade workers. This silencing is consonant with "a process of othering [which] runs through the modern and feminist constructions of the prostitute body... [and which] dichotomizes the female into the 'good' and 'bad' woman in all her manifestations" (Bell 2). While several of the women's narratives articulated feminist concerns, as they were articulated by sex trade workers, they posited an alternative feminism not typically encompassed by feminist academic discourse. Moreover, for many feminists, academics, and, of course, the mainstream, sex work remains a "taboo" subject. Despite scholarly efforts to collapse the traditional Western dualism separating mind from body, activities of the body remain, in the academy as well as the wider social world, generally devalued and proscribed. Conquergood articulates this point clearly when he states,

> [T]he body and the flesh are linked with the irrational, unruly, and dangerous--certainly an inferior realm of experience to be controlled by the higher powers of reason and logic. ("Rethinking..." 180)

Concomitantly, contemporary socio-cultural evaluation of sexually inflected bodily activities produces, according to Gayle Rubin, a "sexual hierarchy" (281). Those activities associated with "Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural, [and] Damned Sexuality" (281), with which sexual activity for commercial gain is one, are relegated to this hierarchy's bottom level (282). The performance, then, produced as it was on the university

campus of a rural mid-Western town, challenged the prevailing values as a subject worthy of scholarly engagement as well as the prevailing societal standards of ethics and propriety. This issue was succinctly voiced by my mother who after attending the performance said, "I have to admit that I wasn't sure if it [exotic dancers] was an appropriate academic subject. And I wasn't sure it [the performance] was appropriate to do in the mid-west." Clearly this statement articulates her regional bias, yet it also points to how our sense making and evaluations are tied to our membership in communities.[3]

The Social Contexts:

Admittedly, audience members arrive at a theatre for any number of reasons. I can not claim to account for them all; nor can I claim that my assessment below exhausts the variety of rationales for attending and reasons for their responses. Moreover, the following does not account for all the comments I received. Nevertheless, as I consider the evaluative responses I received, three groups emerge that are salient to this discussion, each linked by a common agenda for attending the performance. I received seventeen written evaluations by undergraduate students who were required to attend the performance and write a critique as a class assignment.[4] Being that the performance was a Speech Communication department production, graduate students in the performance studies concentration were also required to see it and attend a one-hour oral critique/discussion following the performance. Three performance studies faculty were similarly obliged to attend both the performance and the oral critique. I draw my examples from these written evaluations and the taped transcript of the oral critique.

While individual audience members may have been compelled to attend my show for similar reasons and so collectively constitute interpretive communities, I am not suggesting that their evaluations were at all homogeneous. Indeed, Smith argues

that

our evaluations are characteristic of an "irreducible scrappiness" (148 italics in original). As such,

> the elements that interact to constitute our motives and behavior are incomplete and heterogeneous, like scraps of things, but also ("scrap" being a slang term for fight) that they are mutually conflicting or at least always potentially at odds. (148)

This "scrappiness" is certainly evident within the criticism my performance produced. Despite this scrappiness, I suggest that interpretive communities access performances differently and so utilize the three critical contexts differently. Perhaps not surprisingly, at least within the confines of the formal oral critique, the majority of the comments made by the performance studies faculty and graduate students evaluated the performance as a critical act. Furthermore, conventions of civility may have delimited the level of "scrappiness" that might have surfaced more in other less formal circumstances. Moreover, my attendance at the oral critique may have reduced the presence of more heterogeneous and conflictual critical evaluations. The issues raised in oral critique grounded in the critical context of the performance as critique, did so principally through questions and comments pertaining to how faithful I was to the women's narratives in the scripting process, whether or not my production "glorifies" stripping, and whether or not the production "dismantles" feminist theory.

The comments and questions made about my faithfulness in the scripting process foregrounded credibility and accountability as significant issues. These questions hinged upon whether the narratives should be viewed as credible articulations of the strippers' experiences or as devices which served my rhetorical ends. The prevalent assumption revealed in the discussion seems to be that if I altered the narratives to serve my own ends (by re-writing or other invasive means) then the

production would lose its critical edge by compromising its verisimilitude. Moreover, the issue was raised that the women are using the opportunity to tell their story to me as a means of justifying their activities. One assumption possible here is that the women would not want to tell the truth and would be compelled to rationalize their engagement in a culturally devalued activity. Evaluation divided on this issue as some commented that they found the women's stories "compelling," "believable," and "honest" while others refused to grant credibility to the women's stories. One graduate student stated that

> the women [in the production] were in a very unhealthy situation that they were trying to create their own justification for...it corrupted their ability to relate to men... and I think there was a whole lot of festering that was glossy and shiny and not reflected in the surfaces, or the slides, or the audience's reception.

This comment suggests that the performance "glorified" stripping and it also suggests how preconceptions figure into evaluations. This student's comment implies to me that she could not let go of her preconceptions about strippers, and she chose instead to dismiss the women's narratives rather than problematize her own moral code. And yet, not all those present at the critique regarded the show as glorifying strippers' work. One faculty member stated, "At some level..whether or not they are articulating a rosy vision of their lives...it still seems pretty pathetic..it's kind of sad." Another faculty member commented:

> I'm having difficulty seeing this as a glorification of this lifestyle. I don't think there is a glorification here.... I think what the show takes away from me is an easy dismissal, an easy "what terrible objectification/ exploitation of women." I don't think it takes that narrative away but it makes it much more complicated.

These comments point to not only how contingent the evaluations of my performance are but also how contingent the values we place on activities in the social world are.

One faculty member specifically articulated this by saying the following:

> What becomes interesting is how one situates the variety of different activities that one can participate in, in terms of using...bodies in certain kinds of ways.... and what culturally can be sanctioned and what kinds of narratives allow this to be a permissible or not a permissible thing to do and under what moral code.

With regard to the issue as to whether or not the performance "dismantled" feminism or not, a variety of disparate comments were made. One possible reading of the show was suggested in which one might come away thinking that "all that feminist theory is just wrong." Moreover, it was argued that since the narratives are so much more compelling than the textual slides, the theory is subordinated to the women's stories. This, it was suggested, allowed the narratives to constitute "an incredibly powerful critique" of feminism. One graduate student countered this by saying that although the show "deconstructs the theory" my performance "argues for feminisms." This discussion was interesting to me for despite my arguing in the show and in the critique that some strippers do regard themselves as feminists, some of the participants in the critique appeared unwilling to accept these women's viewpoints as feminist.

The undergraduate critiques quite infrequently evaluate the performance for its significance as a critical act. Generally, when these comments appear, they allude to the students' expectations for the performance given its socially proscribed theme. Comments like, "I didn't know what to expect" or "God only knows where that [the topic of the show] was going to lead" signify these expectations. Others commented upon how the performance treated men. One male writer said that the show "left a bad taste in [his] mouth," that he was "angry with the characters on stage" and found the production to be "Male Bashing." In contrast to this, another male writer, commented that he had expected he would feel "bashed," and so he was surprised to find that he did not experience that. Along the same line, a different undergraduate

critic (whose gender is unknown to me) commented that she/he thought that the "males in the audience may have been offended by some of the character's comments." Also, another (gender unknown) stated, "[w]hile I was not offended...a elderly couple in front of me was clearly upset by the use of verbal language which was used [sic]." By far the most negative critique came from a feminist in the audience. She first mentioned her pre-threshold expectation towards the show's topic by saying, "I have always looked down upon pornography... and feel that it is demeaning not only to the women who participate in it, but to all women."[5] She went on to identify the circumstances of her audiencing and how it affected her reception in the following way:

> I did not know that Ms. Lockford's play was about exotic dancing and pornography before entering the "theater," [sic] and it is safe to say that after finding out, I judged this performance with less than an open mind. I felt somewhat violated being "forced" to watch a screen while images of naked women exploiting themselves for male gratification were being shoved down my throat. Perhaps showing these painful images was designed to make me feel uncomfortable, but had I not been required to see the play, I would have left.

These comments speak directly to her expectations and the conditions under which she was made to view the performance. She then also stated that she "received the message...that these women...are not being victimized by men, but are being victimized by feminists who demean their careers." Arguably, her resistance to the show was influenced by her pre-threshold feminist viewpoint and the fact that she was required to see the show.

The Performance as Scholarly Activity

The Critical Context:

Many of the issues relating to this critical context are raised above. However,

the issue as to whether or not researching exotic dancers is an appropriate scholarly endeavor goes beyond how the topic helped to constitute the performance as a critical act. During the year that I engaged in the ethnographic research and prepared for the performance numerable comments were made to me by faculty members and peers as to the suitability of the topic. I had several meetings with my advisor relating to the ethics of performing this production at the university and how my opportunities for job placement might be affected if I pursue it for my dissertation. Increasingly, after it was announced in the department that I would be performing a show about exotic dancers, various critical, evaluative, and/or inquisitive comments were made to me either directly or reported to me as discourse then circulating in the graduate student community. Moreover, when in conversation with some of my peers, if the subject of my research came up, either by my bringing it up or by someone else, it was not uncommon for me to observe non-verbal behaviors that indicated discomfort in the people I was speaking with. Frequently, graduate students and faculty queried me with what seemed to me to be veiled attempts at humor that masked their more pertinent concerns. Questions were rarely posed to me about how my research was shaping up. Rather, more typically, "jests" were made which seemed designed to ascertain whether or not I would indeed be stripping during the show. As my production concept was formulated very late, and also as I increasingly simply became silent about what I was planning for the performance, I began to suspect that some faculty and graduate students held a pre-threshold expectation that I was going to be stripping in the show. As the performance dates approached comments about my moral rectitude seemed to become less and less thinly disguised. For example, one faculty member quite casually explained that given who I am "everyone" in the department was expecting me to strip in the show. Thus, it began to appear to me that, generally, in the department distinctions between my person and the people I was studying began increasingly to

blur. This discursive environment had the effect of making me keenly aware of the implicit sanctions against my taking on this research. Generally, my response was to keep silent to my peers about my research. This silence struck me as an ironic point of connection between my work and the work of the women I was studying since they too often feel they must remain silent about their work. It became clear to me that not only were my interpersonal relationships being tested and my reputation within the department being evaluated, engagement with this research topic could materially affect me in my job search in the future, both by virtue of the topic in itself as well as through my peers who may have influence in the years to come.

Notwithstanding this more covert discursive environment, overtly, my research was given as much (if not more) positive encouragement as other research projects concurrent in the department. The show was approved by the department for inclusion in the performance season and my advisor worked closely with me during my research. Moreover, ethnography is clearly a burgeoning field in performance studies scholarship and, currently, performance-centered approaches[6] to scholarly engagement are generating a lot of disciplinary attention.[7] That my project utilized currently valorized research methods allowed it to gain academic credibility, at least on that level.

The Social Contexts:

Not surprisingly, the undergraduate critiques never access the performance on these evaluative grounds. Whereas, as one might expect, the performance studies faculty did utilize this critical context to some extent. Unlike my experience in informal discussions outlined above, within the formal context of the oral critique there were no comments that challenged the topic's academic worth. What comments and questions that were made about the performance as a scholarly activity centered on performance methodology. I was asked to discuss how I came to embody the characters and how I used the audio recordings to that end. These comments once

again signify these interpretive communities' interest in the degree of verisimilitude between the women I interviewed and what was represented in the show. Moreover, these issue raise questions current in performance studies scholarship in the turn toward bringing the mundane into the aesthetic frame.

The Performance as an Aesthetic Event

The Critical Context:

As Hilde Hein reminds, "[t]he sources of aesthetic delight are multifarious and obscure [and] the very identification of the aesthetic, let alone what is a 'work of art,' defies logic (8). In the contemporary shift away from essentializing Enlightenment ideals and universal principals of aesthetic value, evaluation and evaluative authority become, as Barbara Hernstein Smith proposes, "radically contingent" (30, 72-73). As such, "values are specifically situated...,they constantly shift," and what is more, "we ascribe value to what interests us" (Long 108 emphasis added). Given the difficulty of absolutely defining the "aesthetic" without appealing to universals, I do not here propose to define how my performance was or was not aesthetic. Rather, I shall suggest how the different interpretive social communities assessed the performance as an aesthetic event. To this end, I employ Pelias and VanOosting's three conditions of the aesthetic. They assert that the presence of any one of these conditions or their interaction enables a communication event to be considered aesthetic. These conditions are as follows: (1)The event is intended as aesthetic. This condition places focus on how the performer is using the communication event as aesthetic (221). (2)The event displays qualities generally recognized as aesthetic (221). Here the focus is not on the performer's intentions nor the audience's response; rather it relies on what is displayed by the text or in the performance. (3)The event has an aesthetic effect. This condition focuses on the audience's response, on whether or not they assume the

role of an audience and recognize the performer as engaging in an aesthetic event (221).

Of the three conditions, probably the least salient to our discussion here is the first; I believe it would be difficult not to assume that I had intended the performance to be viewed as an aesthetic event. With regard to the second condition, the performance displayed a number of qualities that can be said to conform to what is generally considered aesthetic. As the performance was part of the Speech Communication department's season and that is was performed in a theatre, it was clearly framed as an aesthetic event. Furthermore, while the bulk of the text was the mundane speech of my interviewees their narratives were clearly framed as aesthetic. Thus, these elements of framing supported, to some extent, the second condition. However, as might be expected, whether or not the performance's topic displayed qualities that are generally regarded as aesthetic was controversial. Moreover, the debatable nature of the topic, as well as some elements of the staging (such as the interjection of the textual slides) had an impact on some audience members' willingness to assume the role of audience. In these instances, the second and third conditions interact and the ensuing criticism challenges whether or not the performance was, for those audience members, aesthetically valuable.

If, as Long (qua Hernstein Smith) suggests, value is dependent upon what interests us (108), then perhaps our evaluations often reflect the engagement we experience as we encounter an aesthetic event. To suggest that an aesthetic event should be "engaging" I draw upon Susan Morris' definition as a "complexity of perception and attentiveness" (36). Perception, she states is a "sustained capacity to ...feel, relate, imagine, and enlarge" (36) and when coupled with attentiveness we are enabled to see "the very specific uniqueness of the individual and the situation in which the individual stands" (36). I suggest that "engagement" depends upon the

combined interaction of Pelias and VanOosting's last two conditions. This is to say, that if the performance displays qualities generally recognizable as aesthetic and to which a given audience member agrees, the audience member may more willingly adopt the role of audience and perhaps thereby positively evaluate the performance as aesthetic. An audience member may be engaged by a performance through enjoying such elements as the skill of the performer, the quality of the theatrical setting, the humor, the meaningfulness of the story, the overall cohesiveness and structure of the event, and the accessibility and significance of the ideas.

One way to view what I am calling engagement is suggested by the distinctions between the two audience roles Erving Goffman has termed "onlookers" and "theatergoers" (129-130). An "onlooker" "collaborates" in the performance and "gives himself [or herself] over" to the performance (130). A "theatergoer" on the other hand, is "kicked out" of her or his engagement with the performance when something in the performance makes the individual resistant to the performance.

Clearly, Goffman's terms support traditional standards relevant to Western realist drama in which the suspension of disbelief operates as a standard criterion. Interrogative texts such as my performance, as well as a various postmodern and socio-political theatre, attempt to create constructive resistance through devices that break the suspension of disbelief. In these cases, where an audience member's engagement is problematized by being positioned or she/he adopts the position of "onlooker" and "theatergoer" alternately, the individual may nevertheless evaluate the performance, or at least portions of it, as aesthetically valuable. Despite what may appear as a break in engagement, the audience member may still "collaborate" in the meaning even if not entirely "giv[ing her- or] himself over" to the performance. However, perhaps if an audience member's engagement is "kicked out" to the extent that the resistance is not constructive, but rather the audience member is confused or annoyed, then the audience

member may lose interest and negatively evaluate the performance or that portion of the performance.

In sum, evaluating the performance as an aesthetic event typically occurred at the nexus of the qualities that the performance displayed and what effect these qualities had on the audience.

The Social Contexts:

There were only a few comments in the oral critique that the performance studies faculty and graduate student interpretive communities made to evaluate the performance as an aesthetic event. With regard to how members of these interpretive communities found the performance engaging, only three comments were made to this effect. One graduate student prompted a shift in the discussion towards her engagement with the aesthetic value of the performance by stating,

> I'd like to talk about the wonderful work that she did in characterization, using her voice and body and talk about embodiment...I thought you did a great job. All the women were really distinctive....I really appreciated the hard, hard work you put in characterization."

This comment was followed by a moment of silence and then a faculty member shifted the discussion once more by raising a question on how I used the audio taped recordings of the interviews. At the end of the critique it was this same graduate student who said, "Good, good show." One faculty member prefaced other issues he wanted to raise by saying that he "enjoyed the performance."

The remaining discussion made by these two interpretive communities with regard to its aesthetic considerations focused on how the theory quoted on the slides worked in the performance. Issues were raised by both faculty and graduate students that speculated about the undergraduates' willingness to read the quotes on the slides. It was presumed that many of the undergraduates would not be acquainted with

feminist theory and would therefore find the slides troublesome. Questions were raised by faculty members as to whether the undergraduates would take the time to read all the quotes and if they did, would they find them confusing or helpful. It was assumed that the quotes would "kick" these audience members out of their engagement with the show. It was suggested by a faculty member that had I used only the titles and not the quotes the show may not have been significantly different. It would, she suggested, have achieved the same critical commentary without risking these audience members' annoyance, confusion, or boredom with the textual slides. Some comments were made by two graduate students who said that they appreciated the quotes. One stated that even though he had to read them twice and, even on occasion, three times, he claimed that the quotes enriched his experience of the show.

Interestingly, of the eight undergraduate evaluations that comment on the slides four claimed that they liked them and found them helpful. One commented, "I liked the use of the overhead quotes to show some of the different views and beliefs." Another stated, "Lesa provided some excellent intellectual tidbits to ponder (Marxist and lesbian, feminist perspectives)." The other four who negatively evaluated the slides found them confusing or in support of beliefs differing from their own. For example, one male commented that he found the slide "quite interesting, although they confused [him] as to the perspective this show was seen through." Another said, "I felt ignorant....like Homer Simpson when trying to read some of the quotations from several feminists on the screen." The feminist undergraduate, cited above, claimed "I received the message from the quotations that these women who participate in pornography are not being victimized by men, but are being victimized by feminists who demean their careers." Clearly, among the undergraduate interpretive community there were several conflicting interpretations made about the slides and implicitly they questioned their value to the performance.

Overwhelmingly, the majority of the undergraduates focused their comments on the aesthetic qualities they enjoyed in the show. In particular, they frequently cited the skill I demonstrated during the performance. This may be due in part to their not reading the slides and, therefore, they chose to respond through those elements that they found more accessible. Many of the undergraduates commented that they were "involved," that they "really loved it," and that they found the performance to be "an enjoyable way to spend an evening." One male wrote "I was so preoccupied with the storyline, I neglected to examine the other aspects of the production." Also many of the students commented that they found my characters to be "believable," that I used my voice and body well, and that they enjoyed seeing me create five different characters. Several also commented positively on the set and how the performance flowed from section to section. Of the 17 undergraduate critiques none of them faulted the performance. One admitted to finding it "somewhat unusual" without explicitly stating why. Even the feminist undergraduate positively critiqued my performance even while maintaining resistance to the topic's suitability and to what she interpreted as the performance's "message."

Summary of the Findings

That the majority of the evaluative comments made by the performance studies faculty and graduate students focused on the performance as a critical act suggests how a discipline specific agenda shapes these evaluations within the formal context of a professional critique session. While many of these same folk spoke to me in informal settings about their enjoyment of the performance, the formality of the oral critique shifted the critical context and so changed how they chose to articulate their evaluations of the show. Moreover, the informal conversations I had prior to the show indicated concern about the topic's academic suitability. Yet, after the show comments

regarding the topic's suitability were mostly absent from the critical evaluations I received from the faculty and graduate students in both the formal and the informal settings. Of course, at that point it is something of a fait accompli. If these issues were voiced at all they were made when I was not present.

More than within any other critical context, the undergraduates' evaluations principally focused on the performance as an aesthetic event. Yet, issues regarding the appropriateness of the topic or these audience members' expectations about the topic did inform their evaluations both negatively and positively. Considering the that the show was nearly full or sold out on each of the three nights, the topic may have appealed more to the undergraduates than did other performances that season first, for the sensational nature of the topic and second, perhaps for its relevance to undergraduate lives. For example, for those women in the audience who support themselves through school by dancing in the local area strip clubs, I assume the topic would have held special relevance. Notably, three women who identified themselves as dancers (and students) did individually come up to speak with me after the performances.

However, predominantly the undergraduates' written evaluations chose to evaluate the performance on the basis of its aesthetic qualities. This may reflect a general tendency in the undergraduates to access a performance evaluatively in terms of its entertainment value. That is to say that, presumably, they found the performance most accessible in terms of how they did or did not enjoy it. They would, I assume, generally be less knowledgeable about the discipline-specific concerns that the performance studies faculty and graduate students focused on. Yet, given that aesthetic considerations were so absent from the faculty and graduate students critique it raises concerns for me about how we value the aesthetic in our discipline. Do we see aesthetic engagement or the pleasure we derive from performance events as always

already expected and so not worthy of attention in our professional discourse? Or do we value performances as aesthetic events so little in relation to other concerns that we feel our time is better spent in other critical contexts? While I would not suggest that our evaluative discourse should become congratulatory and focus principally on performers' abilities, I do wonder how we value performative technique. Moreover, I question if performances with questionable aesthetic qualities and effects are potentially less valued within the other critical contexts that a given performance generates? For example, had my performance been received as poorly performed or as conceptually ill-conceived would my performance have received more openly negative evaluation for its suitability within an academic institution? Furthermore, as our discipline turns towards the body as a site of knowing I wonder if there is not some disciplinary acumen to be gained through more attention to what we do performatively with our bodies? As this essay endeavors to show, our membership in interpretive communities sets our evaluative agendas and these agendas perhaps shape our community values. As we begin to value the epistemological body I wonder how our interpretive and disciplinary community will be shaped?

Endnotes

1. This point was made by Jill Dolan in her paper, "Feminism in the Academy: Dances with Wolves" presented as part of the Problems in Feminism panel at the National Conference of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education in Chicago, Illinois, 28 July, 1994.

2. c.f., the collected essays in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, eds. Conflicts in Feminism (New York: Routledge, 1990).

3. In my mother's defense, there is some evidence to support her apprehension. For a compelling and frightening discussion of the events and ramifications surrounding two problematic productions produced on two mid-western universities, see the five articles in "Politicized Performances: A Symposium," in Text and Performance Quarterly 12 (1992) 362-394. These articles further underscore the point that community membership affects evaluation.

4. These critiques were provided to me by these students' teachers after the students gave their permission for me to have them. Generally, the students' names were removed prior to my getting them. Thus, in most cases I know very little about the criteria the instructors set for these evaluations or about the people who wrote these critiques. For example, in several cases I do not know the authors' gender. Most of the critiques were by undergraduate students in general education classes. These were either general education classes in performance studies or interpersonal communication. A few critiques were from students in the upper division performance studies courses

and were thus, speech communication majors. It is not always clear what class the critiques came from as often these critiques were put in my mailbox without the instructor who put them there attaching any note.

5. Bernard Beckerman discusses "pre-threshold factors" in his article, "Theatrical Perception," Theatre Research International 4 (1979): 157-171. He states, "pre-threshold factors can be theatrical or extra-theatrical. By extra-theatrical factors, I mean all those matters such as values, current events, social behavior, and ethnic outlook that potentially can affect our responses" (163-164).

6. Kirk W. Fuoss and Randall T. Hill define a performance-centered approach as "an approach [that] takes performance as it's object of investigation and employs performance as its primary method" (77). In my project, ethnography was the primary method of data gathering. Once in rehearsal, the emphasis shifted to performance as a method for understanding the other. As I write this article the performance features, at least in part, as the object of investigation.

7. c.f., Dwight Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics," Communication Monographs, 58 (1991): 179-194; Kristin M. Langellier, "From Text to Social Context," Literature in Performance 6 (1986): 60-70; Jill L. O'Brien, "Performance as Criticism: Discoveries and Documentation Through Enactment," Communication Studies 40 (1989): 189-201; Jacqueline Taylor, "Documenting Performance Knowledge: Two Narrative Techniques in Grace Paley's Fiction," The Southern Speech Communication Journal 53 (1987): 65-79.

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